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The Eye of the Other: Visuality in *Ill Seen Ill Said*

Ill Seen Ill Said (1981), often classified, albeit against the intentions of the author, as belonging to Beckett's second trilogy (*Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho*),[1] is a text which, according to James Knowlson, "is best read as an exquisite prose poem."[2] Though the story is still written with a distinctively impersonal voice, a trademark of Beckettian style, it clearly departs from the "midget grammar" and "camera images" of his earlier work, e.g. *Lessness* and *Fizzles*. Instead of embarking on what would ultimately amount to a futile interpretation of the text, I will instead focus on certain themes which I consider not only prevalent in Beckett's texts but also indicative of a wider philosophical relation that exists between his works and the works of Maurice Blanchot whose philosophy will provide a conceptual framework for this paper.[3] The title of Beckett's text will serve as a starting point for an elaboration on the link between sight and speech and, by extension, between vision and writing. This will lead to a consideration of the Blanchotian concept of writing and its applicability to *Ill Seen Ill Said*. It is the contention of this paper that *Ill Seen Ill Said* is a self-referential account of the writing process and, when approached within the question of visuality, will yield a reading which is attuned both to Blanchot's thoughts on the process of writing and to the antiocularcentric investment underpinning those thoughts.

Though the interrelations between visuality and understanding have occupied philosophers since antiquity, I will restrict my consideration to the 20th century and approach this vast question through the work of Maurice Blanchot, who, in turn, allies himself with Nietzsche's anti-ocularcentrism. Blanchot asks: "Why, among all possible metaphors, does the optical meta-

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[1] In S.E. Gontarski's 1996 introduction to the *Three Novels* (the accepted title by the American and British editions of *Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho*), he recounts that despite Beckett's vocal apprehensions towards grouping the three novels under the title *Trilogy*, critics persistently refer to the three novels as a trilogy.

[2] J. Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, New York: Touchstone, 1996, 558.

[3] Blanchot did write a short article on Beckett's trilogy, particularly *The Unnamable*, entitled "Where now? Who now?" which can be found in a collection of essays, *The Book to Come*. In this article, Blanchot focuses mainly on the question of the source of the speaking "I", yet offers no developed articulation of Beckett's work in more philosophical terms.

phor predominate? Why this imperialism of light?."[4] Nietzsche recognized that the ubiquity of visual metaphors in our language testifies to the degree to which seeing has become the ultimate metaphor for understanding. Just as sight is capable of instantly embracing its field of vision, thus making the outside world "legible" for the perceiving subject, so linguistic understanding, in its aim to totalitize the unknown, is also based on the mind's capacity to create a comprehensible – and therefore closed – system within which the subject is posited as the Cartesian *cogito*. The stability of the seen world thus depends on the stability of the cogito, i.e., on the stability of the perceiving I/eye.

The title of Beckett's work indicates not only the existence of a relation between seeing and saying, but also the impossibility of either of them being fully achieved. We are familiar with Beckett's distrust of language as a medium of expression; hence, the paring down of language, the gradual linguistic disintegration characteristic of Beckett's post-trilogy texts. Though language and its limits occupy an essential place in Beckett's texts, the ontologically constitutive role of visuality has always accompanied this linguistic investment, testifying to the influence Descartes and Berkeley had on his work.[5] If language and visuality are linked in terms of their function as mediums for understanding, then both are shown to be ultimately flawed and riddled with aporias. Consequently, any kind of saying will necessarily and always be an "ill saying" and, likewise, any kind of seeing will be an "ill seeing." As the narrator of *Ill Seen Ill Said* states at one point: "The mind betrays the treacherous eyes and the treacherous word their treacheries."[6] Thus, against the grain of the Western ocularcentric tradition, established predominantly with the Cartesian cogito, "seeing" in this text is not commensurate with understanding. Light brings no clarity, only treacheries. The ambiguities and paradoxes of speech which figured in Beckett's preceding novels are thus now presented as visual aporias.

In *Ill Seen Ill Said*, the contrast or clash between blackness and whiteness, between visibility and invisibility, as well as the role of light are emphasized throughout the text, where we are presented with a woman, simply referred to as "she", who is clad in black (perhaps mourning), in a room where "she sits on erect and rigid in the deepening gloom" (49). The only white is found

[4] M. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, (transl.) S. Hanson, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis and London, 1993, 162.

[5] Beckett's fascination with Descartes dates to his early years as a writer with such works as *Whoroscope*. The influence Descartes' philosophy had on Beckett's work cannot be overestimated, even in the later prose works, such as in the trilogy, where Cartesian logic and the mind as *camera obscura* is brought into question.

[6] S. Beckett, *Ill Seen Ill Said. Nohow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worsward Ho*, New York: Grove Press, 1996, 78, henceforth cited parenthetically within the text.

on her face and hands, and later, as the narrative unfolds with her back and forth journey from her cabin located "at the inexistent centre of a formless place" (50) to a graveyard, where she kneels in front of a tombstone. Along the way, amid the "zone of stones" she is constantly followed by a hovering, disembodied eye, which, having "no need of light to see," (50) relentlessly pursues her every step. Upon reaching the graveyard, this mysterious figure finds herself surrounded by twelve "figments" who silently stand afar "invisible were she to raise her eyes" (68).

What this journey to the tombstones constitutes is a repetitive movement of the narrative, a pendulum movement whose rhythm reflects the binary black and white construction of the narrated world. This rhythm suggests an interstitial zone situated between the two opposing states (light, dark; presence, absence); it is a place of indeterminacy, evidenced in the title itself *Ill Seen Ill Said*: what is seen by the woman or by the hovering eye is neither fully seen nor completely invisible, what is said is neither fully said nor silent. Indeterminacy, liminality and limbo are features of many Beckettian texts, where words never seem to attain finality, either in absolute absence or presence. This is also the situation of *The Unnamable*, where we have the subjective voice of the speaking "I" speaking from a place between life and death with nothing but the words of its consciousness keeping it company. Similarly, the narrative of *Ill Seen Ill Said*, shrouded in haze and fog, is indicative of the visual indeterminacy pervading the text as a whole. Vision is often impeded by impenetrable darkness or fog to the point that there is nothing left to see but the darkness and fog themselves. "The eye will close in vain. To see but haze. Not even. Be itself but haze" (78). Never is the reader certain of the presence of anything, least of all the protagonist, whose ontological status is always in question, as she is repeatedly and mysteriously vanishing and reappearing: "But she can be gone at any time. From one moment of the year to the next suddenly no longer there. No longer anywhere to be seen. Nor by the eye of flesh nor by the other" (56).

I would like to focus on this quote, as it brings together a few important elements: firstly, the ontological significance of seeing and secondly, the position of the eye. Firstly, what is significant about the woman's presence is that it is completely separated from the gaze of the eye; neither is she constituted or "divined" by the eye nor does she seem to be under its power. The eye in vain pursues her, tries to capture her, but remains always impotently passive and independent of her. The grammatical ambiguity of the last sentence: "nor by the eye of the flesh nor by the other" raises questions concerning the position and relevance of the eye in regard to the woman. Are we to understand that there is another eye apart from the physical one used for vision, an eye of the poetic imagination perhaps? Or are we to understand

that there is a physical eye belonging to one person and another eye belonging to an other, the Other. This ambiguity is exacerbated if we take this to be another of Beckett's puns on the "I" as the subject and the "eye" of perception. Who is perceiving and who is perceived? This is a question (now posed within the visual paradigm) which harks back to the central dilemma haunting the trilogy: "Who speaks the "I" of the text?"

A similar relation to the one found between the writer (perceiver) and the woman (the perceived) can also be discerned in Beckett's *Film*, where we see (or rather we are) a camera pursuing Buster Keaton's character in an attempt to finally capture or seize it. A strikingly similar drama unfolds in *Ill Seen Ill Said* with the woman being pursued by the hovering eye (narrator). And again, the eye of the narrator cannot seize the subject of its gaze, as the woman is always half-present, liable to disappear at any moment. "But quick seize her where she is best to be seized. In the pastures far from shelter" (55). What relevance and significance then does the eye have that would warrant such attention from Beckett?

At least two possible approaches exist to this question. The eye can be construed as the eye of the omnivoyant Other, whose pursuit to visually capture the woman in her full presence is frustrated by either fog and haze or by her tentative corporeal presence. However, let us consider the alternative. It is equally possible to construe the woman as the other. Seeing her would entail defining her within the space of the eye's visual field. Defining her, however, would in effect deprive her of her alterity. The eye's gaze is directed at the woman, who is not aware of the eye's presence. Despite this violent gaze, the woman's alterity is ensured by our not discerning her and is further reinforced by our absolute ignorance of her thoughts and motives which lie outside the narrative and therefore outside our knowledge. Furthermore, the impenetrable haze and confusion surrounding her bars access to this knowledge, thereby securing her from the "objectifying gaze." This distance – both visual and epistemological – is maintained between her and the eye, a distance which is the constitutive difference between writing and sight.

This leads us to the question of writing. As was stated before, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, seen as an extension of the semi-autobiographical *Company*, focuses on the artistic process of writing rather than on biographical fragments of the artist's life. "Already all confusion. Things and imaginings. As of always. Confusion amounting to nothing. Despite precautions. If only she could be pure figment. Unalloyed. This old so dying woman. So dead. In the madhouse of the skull and nowhere else" (*Ill Seen Ill Said*, 58). The meaning and effects of writing will thus be recognized as occupying the salient theme of the text. If *Ill Seen Ill Said* is read in such a way, then the "poetics of naming" indeed becomes central to our analysis.

In the chapter entitled "Speaking is not Seeing" of his monumental book, *The Infinite Conversation*, Blanchot poses a challenge to the ocularcentric bias of Western philosophy by exposing the underlying reasons for such a privileging. The same reason why sight was elevated to the metaphor for understanding and thus given primacy over language is for Blanchot the reason for its downfall. As was mentioned earlier, seeing as understanding involves the violent act of grasping the object and assimilating it into the order of the Same (to use Levinas's terminology) and thereby destroying the alterity of the perceived object. Sight, because of the immediacy of the relation between the object and the subject, instantly reveals and exposes. The same rule is applicable to writing, since it is also in danger of destroying the alterity of what approaches, if the purpose of writing is to "delimit" and "define." For Maurice Blanchot – and I believe also for Beckett – writing is thus trapped in a double-bind, wherein the necessity of writing is linked with the impossibility of writing in such a way that would preserve the alterity of the object. In other words, seeing and writing, in their different yet ultimately violent ways, efface the perceived object as an Other. This underlies Beckett's famous impasse stated in the interview with Georges Duthuit about the obligation to express coupled with the impossibility to express.[7] The same impasse "of having nothing to write, of having no means of writing it, and of being forced by an extreme necessity to keep writing it"[8] is echoed by Blanchot in "From Dread to Language." What should be remembered, thus, is that the impossibility to express or (as is the case in *Ill Seen Ill Said*) to see, rests on the presupposition that seeing and saying eradicate the otherness which stands as the ineffable source of writing.

For Blanchot writing does not necessarily have to fall into the same imperialistic category as sight. He attempts to address the possibility of a language which would be separated from the ocularcentric metaphor, based on the unveiling of the thing said, "a speech such that to speak would no longer be to unveil with light". Here what reveals itself does not give itself up to sight, just as it does not take refuge in simple invisibility."[9] By combining the sight metaphor with speech, Blanchot's notion of light is anything but an agent of epistemological revelation. Here, the theme of indeterminacy, where something is neither visible nor invisible, defers from the encapsulating law of light.

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[7] "The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (*Three Dialogues*, 17). This has been regarded as one of the few statements of purpose Beckett has provided for his work.

[8] M. Blanchot, "From Dread to Language". *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction & Literary Essays*, (ed.) G. Quash, (transl.) L. Davis, P. Auster, Barrytown, New York: Station Hill Press, 1999, 345.

[9] M. Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, (transl.) S. Hanson, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, 29.

One of the constitutive differences between vision and language is the extent of the limits each respective medium possesses. Whereas vision, grounded as it is in one perspective, is always bound by the limitations of a horizon which encircles the subject, language, on the other hand, has no such limitations and is capable of limitless perspectives. Blanchot writes: "The terrifying word passes over every limit and even the limitlessness of the whole."[10] The terror he writes of lies in the absolute transgression of language, which "no longer presents itself as speech, but as sight freed from the limitations of sight."[11] What is more, visibility annuls the distance between the object and spectator, but in speech there is always a difference, a distance in the form of language.

Keeping this in mind, I would like to introduce Blanchot's distinction between two types of writing; the writing of the day and the writing of the night. Writing of the day, also referred to as the first slope, refers to traditional prose, wherein language serves the writer in order to represent ideas clearly and realistically. This is the language of enlightenment, of comprehension and clarity; in short, it is a language dependent not only on mimesis but also on the metaphor of light; hence, what is named is known. The other form of writing is nocturnal; the writing of the night does not aim at a mastery of language but instead opens the writer and language to the impersonal voice which is at the source of writing. It is because of this irreducible distance between the writer and the writer's work that Blanchot's concept of nocturnal writing becomes the only "responsible" mode of writing, as only through it is a response to the other possible. In the absence of the law of the light, the uncertain and ineffable can be approached.

This distinction is important, not only because Beckett also uses the night/day opposition to foreground the narrative in *Ill Seen Ill Said*. The protagonist moves between these two states, but only leaves the safety of her cabin when night descends. Encountering the others at the graveyard, the place of death, during the night would be evocative of Blanchot's description of the nocturnal writer for whom ambiguity and silence, the two themes which invoke the infinity of a relation that can never be achieved, take precedence over the "enlightened" and ocularcentric model of language which totalizes, grasps, and comprehends. The ever-present darkness in *Ill Seen Ill Said* – for it is never day, just evening and night – reveals the difference and separation that would otherwise be eliminated by the clarity of light. Visibility is rejected in *Ill Seen Ill Said* for the sake of difference by which a relation with the unseen and ineffable is preserved.

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[10] Ibid., 28.
[11] Ibid., 29.

Writing for Blanchot does not seek to encapsulate the subject and, therefore, it breaks with all "empirical experience of the world" as well as ". . . with thought when thought gives itself as an immediate proximity."[12] And thus, writing, always engaged with the "non-manifest" and the "unknown (understood by Blanchot as the neutral)," will, as a result, always border on the incomprehensible and the ambiguous, and its determinations will strive not for full presence but instead will exist interstitially between the realms of speaking and seeing, between black and white. The woman of *Ill Seen Ill Said* exemplifies the subject of writing in her "vacillations" between the safety of the shelter (the writing of the day) and her nocturnal journey to the graveyard (the writing of the night); she is neither fully present nor fully absent and therefore occupies the position of the limit. Furthermore, the eye's inability to assimilate her provides further indication of the unsurpassable distance Beckett establishes between the subject and the object. The woman does not "give herself as immediate proximity" and so will always remain beyond the totalizing grasp of language as well as vision.

Visuality and writing – as well as another familiar Beckettian and Blanchotian theme, namely, death – come together in Blanchot's analysis of the myth of Orpheus entitled "Gaze of Orpheus." As Martin Jay claims in his account of Blanchot's analysis, "Orpheus's gaze is the founding act of writing because it crosses the threshold of death and seeks in vain to return to an immediate of visual presence that cannot be restored."[13] A comprehensive examination of all the concepts involved in the "Gaze of Orpheus" would prove impractical within the scope of this paper, therefore I will limit my concluding consideration to a reading of this myth in the context of the possibilities and impossibilities of writing in *Ill Seen Ill Said*. My hypothesis will be that Orpheus's descent to the underworld to retrieve Eurydice is a confrontation with the Blanchotian other night and parallels the dramatization of nocturnal writing found in *Ill Seen Ill Said*.

Orpheus is granted permission by Pluto and Persephone to bring Eurydice back under the one condition that he may not turn around and look at her until they have both returned to the light of day. Of course, the pivotal moment of the myth is when Orpheus breaks this agreement and does glimpse at Eurydice at which point she disappears. If we consider Orpheus's project to be, as Blanchot defines it, "to bring back [the work] into daylight and in the daylight give it form, figure and reality,"[14] then this confrontation with Eurydice reveals an impasse which is at the heart of writing. In order to

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[12] Ibid., 261.

[13] M. Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkley: California UP, 1994, 553.

[14] M. Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 437.

complete his Work, which is the retrieval of Eurydice, he must obey the law imposed on him, a law which forbids sight. The law of concealment thus constitutes the necessary limit in Orpheus's work, but it is a limit which must be transgressed in order for Orpheus, or metaphorically the writer, to complete his work, that is, in order to fail. As Simon Critchley writes, Orpheus's aim and the aim of nocturnal writing is not to make the "invisible visible, but to see the invisible as invisible."[15] This impasse defines the work for both Beckett, Blanchot and Orpheus and reveals the inevitable failure of the work. Sight, here being a metaphor for writing, is shown not only in its futility but also in its destructive capacity. Orpheus's gaze is considered to be a movement of desire and inspiration and is thus inextricably linked to writing, which, in turn, "is related to the absence of the work [...]."[16]

In *Ill Seen Ill Said,* the act of looking directly and seizing the object, that is, the woman, is also frustrated. The impossibility to see well in *Ill Seen Ill Said* corresponds to the impossibility of Orpheus's gaze capturing Eurydice. The act of writing for Blanchot and perhaps also for Beckett is predicated on this impossibility of naming or seeing in a way that would once and for all master the object. Eurydice for Blanchot is "the limit of what art can attain; concealed behind a name and covered by a veil, she is the profoundly dark point towards which art, desire, death, and the night all seem to lead."[17] The woman, who is also covered by a veil, also profoundly dark, is for the writer's eye the impossible end towards which seeing and writing leads.

Taking into account all that has been said thus far, it may be assumed that the violent power of language to subdue and destroy, a theme consistently revisited by Blanchot and Beckett, can be understood also to hold true for vision. Why then must everything remain ill seen and ill said? To say or see something completely, not ill, but fully, would be to place it in a totalizing structure thereby eradicating its otherness, reducing it to the context from which we see or name it. This imperialism of light, therefore, refers also to the word, which is used to comprehend and impose order. Beckett's earlier distress regarding saying too much and yet not saying enough can also be seen as bearing a relation to seeing. The power to see clearly in *Ill Seen Ill Said* is just as diminished as the power to speak comprehensibly, that is, in a way that would permanently fix and entrap meaning. "Seeing well" and "saying well" would thus only expose the imperialistic attitude towards the unknown that should always be present as an absence and spoken of in silence.

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[15] S. Critchley, *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, 43.

[16] M. Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 424.

[17] Ibid., 437.

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